

# Left on the Cutting

Children's editors describe some book titles that never made it into print

**D**an Elish's *Born Too Short* was a hard one to title. I wanted it to be funny (because the book is funny), but still true to Matt himself—a decent lad who hardly thinks a rotten thought until eighth grade, the year he is felled by jealousy.



Matt's best friend, Keith Livingston, is tall, a jock, handsome, a success with the opposite sex (some even from upper grades). Matt, stalled at 5'1", is none of these. Watching Keith—and going crazy inside—leads Matt to desperate measures. Dan Elish

dramatizes them with the kind of playful seriousness James Thurber brought to *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. And he gives Matt a wonderful, just-in-time girlfriend, Josie. The author's original title for this comedy of real adolescent life was *The Highest J.Q. in Town*. But it was maybe too obscure. Others followed, all shot down for reasons you may or may not guess: *Me and the Guy with the Movie Star Gums*; *Greene with Envy*; *Second Banana*; *Hating Keith*; *Tall Story from a Short Hero*; *I Can Laugh About It Now*; *Single White Short Guy*; *Promise Not to Hate Me*; *Confessions of a Lip-sucking God*; *Short and Horny*.

I like what we settled upon—and I love the book: a chipper take on a serious subject—the pain of feeling less than lovable. In short, any teenager's world view.

**Richard Jackson,**  
Richard Jackson Books, Atheneum

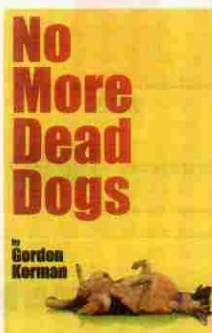
**I** edited an attractive little hardcover book called *Animals Who Have Won Our Hearts* by Jean Craighead George, with beautiful oil portraits by Christine Merrill. Obviously, this title was a mouthful, and one of the biggest laughs I've had over the years was with a colleague in the HarperCollins marketing department who misheard the title

and thought it was *Animals with One Arm*. (Yes, it could have been a book about physically challenged beasts!)

When the book went into paperback, the Trophy department wisely decided to change the title to *Incredible Animal Adventures*. Clearly, this would appeal to kids who buy paperbacks, and make these stories much more accessible and commercial. Needless to say, the hardcover is no longer in print, but I believe the paperback still is—testimony to the power of a good title.

**Katherine Tegen,**  
HarperCollins Children's Books

**N**o More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman was originally titled *Touchdown Stage Left*, but everyone thought that sounded like a football book. While I was having a conversation with the author, he said to me, "I wish we could just call it *No More Dead Dogs* as a plea to stop the dog killing in classic novels!" When I brought it up in a cover meeting, everyone laughed so hard that we decided to use that title.



**Alessandra Balzer,**  
Hyperion Books for Children

**H**umpty Dumpty Egg-Splodes had a long genesis. I originally proposed to Kevin O'Malley that he write an "unauthorized" biography of Mother Goose. He was intrigued by the idea and submitted a dummy for a book called *Mother Goose: Maniac or Mirthmaker*, which focused on a TV talk show called *Lit Chat* and was basically a talking heads discussion of Mother Goose's merits and mental status. It was hysterically funny to adults, but way too sophisticated for children. Kevin went back to the drawing board and reemerged with *Moth-*

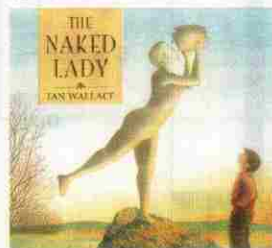
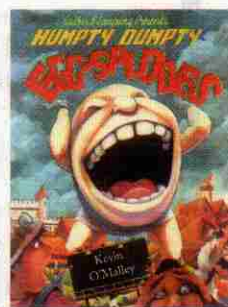
*er Goose Is on the Loose*, in which a mutated giant Mother Goose is on a rampage because children are watching too much TV and is threatening to destroy New York as a punishment. (My favorite part of this version is when Mother Goose battles a giant robotic author atop the New York Public Library.)

But we really couldn't figure out a plausible, funny and non-didactic way to defeat Mother Goose, so we put this version aside. Our last and final version changed the focus of the story to Humpty Dumpty as he attempts to destroy Mother Gooseland after the other nursery-rhyme inhabitants humiliate him because of his habit of falling off the wall (not to mention his big bald egghead). This version has sold well for us in hardcover and was licensed by Scholastic Book Clubs. We are just coming out with a paperback edition this spring.

**Emily Easton, Walker & Co.**

**T**he original title for the first Magic School Bus book, *The Magic School Bus: At the Waterworks* was *Ms. Chipps' Class Trips: The Waterworks*. Deciding to do the first book of the series on a subject as unsexy as The Waterworks really made us look for another series title. Magic School Bus turned out to be a happy solution because it also let Ms. Chipps be renamed Ms. Frizzle. **Craig Walker, Scholastic**

**I**n the fall of 2000 Ian Wallace sent me the first draft of a picture book text entitled *Stone Acre Farm*. It was about a farm boy's first encounter with art, in the form of a huge stone





# Room Floor

statue of one very nude lady. I liked the story a lot, but didn't much like the title, which evolved as follows:

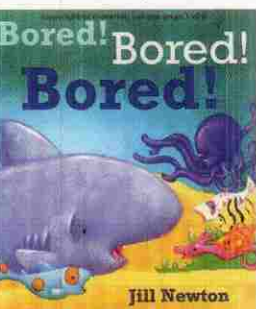
September 23     *Stone Acre Farm*  
 December 1     *The Farm Boy*  
 December 15     *Angelina*  
                          *Meeting Angelina*  
                          *Getting to Know Angelina*  
                          *Painting the Fields*

December 16     *Pieter, the Artist*  
 December 17     *Tom, the Clay Boy*  
 December 19     *The Naked Lady*—a

little rude but certainly provocative—and that was the title of the book when published two years later.

**Neal Porter,**  
**Roaring Brook Press**

**W**e changed a book called *School Bus Bop* to *Bus-a-saurus Bop*. When the art came in, the bus looked like a stegosaur, and we wanted to play up the dinosaur theme—kids love dinosaurs. When we told the author, she said that was the original conception way back before she submitted the manuscript, so it was a psychic moment all around. Another possible title was *Be-hop-a-saurus*, which I love, but we weren't sure kids would get. Of course, they may not get *Bus-a-saurus*, either.



We change British titles on occasion: *Bored Claude* (which rhymes if you say it with an English accent) loses something in the journey, so we changed it to

*Bored! Bored! Bored!*, a line from the book. Likewise, *Baddies, Goodies*, which also doesn't quite work here, we changed to *Barkus, Sly and the Golden Egg*, which is long, but gives more sense of the book, I think.

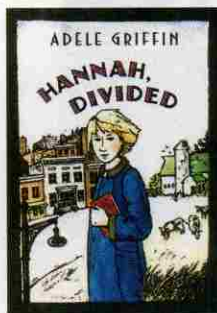
**Victoria Wells Arms,**  
**Bloomsbury Children's Books**

**W**hat's in Santa's Bag?, published in fall 2002, was originally titled *What's in Santa's Sack?* Questions regarding its

sexual connotation surfaced when a few "creative" minds conjured up thoughts of Santa Claus and his private parts. Would "sack" be thought of as more than just a means of transporting toys to good girls and boys? The title became *What's in Santa's Bag?*, thus preserving the innocence and virtue of jolly old St. Nick.

**Melissa Lagonegro, Golden Books**

**A**dele Griffin's recent novel *Hannah, Divided* was originally called *Plus or Minus Maya*. The original title was appropriate—Adele balances the main character's strength in mathematics with weaknesses: her poor reading ability and obsessive behaviors. But early readers of the book felt it was awkward, and I didn't think that Maya was the right name for the girl—too modern-sounding (the novel is set in 1930s Pennsylvania). After discussing several options (and creating a list of 20 or more names—it was like naming a new baby!), Adele herself came up with the new title, which references the divisions in the girl's life.



**Donna Bray,**  
**Hyperion Books for Children**

**C**old Tom is a fantasy novel by first-time author Sally Prue, which was published in the U.K. by Oxford University Press. What impressed us about this book was the poetic intensity of Sally Prue's prose, and the skill with which she creates the strikingly imagined world of her story. Just as exciting, *Cold Tom* is a thrilling fantasy adventure that is impossible to put down. We knew American readers would love it—the challenge was to find the title that would best carry it into their hands.

We worried at first that the British title *Cold Tom* was too, well, cold. Tom, who is both elfin and human, is indeed cold, both to the touch and in his heart—in essence, the story is about how Tom reluctantly,

confusedly, warms up. But would uninitiated readers be put off by those two stark words, "Cold," "Tom"? From another distinctive motif in the book we came up with an alternate title: Tom is able to turn invisible when in danger by "calling on the stars," hence, *Call on the Stars*.

We were committed to this title all the way through to printed readers' copies, but in discussions with sales staff, it became clear that while *Call on the Stars* positioned the book firmly as fantasy, it neglected the literary appeal of the book. The book needed something more unexpected and startling, something like... *Cold Tom*. Suddenly the arresting quality of the original title felt just right. The new (old) title called for a new jacket design, which the designer pulled together in a matter of days. When the book was awarded the Smarties Book Prize Silver Award [in the U.K.], we were all the more satisfied with our decision to use the original title.

Interestingly, in the Oxford University Press office, the original title was *Wild Tom*—which they abandoned when the "stray cat" associations threatened to take over.

**Lauren Thompson and Liz Szabla,**  
**Scholastic Press**

**W**e set about launching Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events in the fall of 1999 with two titles, acquired as *Book the First*, *The Miserable Marriage* and *Book the Second*, *The Reptile Room*. It took only a very informal focus group to reveal the truth: 10-year-old boys are not combing bookstore shelves looking for books that promise to be about marriage. Accordingly, we cast about for a new title, and soon decided upon *The Bad Beginning*. So pleased were we with this change that we promptly set about altering the title of *Book the Second*, which we very nearly sent into the world titled *The Good Guardian*. We regained our judgment in time and *The Reptile Room* stuck. The moral of this story, according to Mr. Snicket, is "nobody knows anything at any given time."

**Susan Rich,**  
**HarperCollins Children's Books**

